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Famine in Time of Feast: Soviet Literary Publishing Under *Glasnost* by Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy

In recent years *glasnost* has served up a virtual feast for Soviet readers starved for decades of easy access to interesting and quality reading matter. Every month, even every week, new "hot items" capture the attention of the reading public as previously suppressed literary works flow into periodicals and out of publishing houses. The volume and speed at which works by previously unpublished emigré, foreign, and dissonant Soviet writers have been appearing in print has radically transformed the reading habits of a significant segment of the Soviet readership.

It is no longer enough to subscribe to the more prestigious "thick" journals based in the capital in order to keep abreast of the exciting events in literary publishing, since the flood of sought-after publications has overflowed into provincial journals and establishment periodicals previously shunned for their blandness. Soviet readers these days frequently voice the lament, both in private and in print, that it is virtually impossible to keep up with the pace of publishing under *glasnost*. It has become common practice for wives and husbands to divide up the reading load. Yet, in one of those ironies so characteristic of Soviet society under Gorbachev, in the midst of the current publishing boom, books — at least those books most people want to read — remain a deficit commodity.

As in earlier years, central bookstores and magazine kiosks in Moscow remain stocked with publications which gather dust, and the situation is reportedly far worse in more distant areas. Against the abundance of titles being turned out these days by Soviet publishers, the continued shortage inevitably arouses anger and frustration. Thus, one woman wrote bitterly from Kuibyshev: "Why do they print pre-publication

copies? To poison the soul? Some people will read these books, and some will only see their titles."¹

In the heated discussion in the press of the chaos reigning in the Soviet book market, commentators most frequently blame the book deficit on paper shortages and on the strain placed on obsolescent typographical equipment by the sharply increased demand coupled with the virtual absence of advanced printing technology available in the West. Complaints also target the lack of mechanisms for accurately gauging the demand for books and the continued existence of a cumbersome bureaucracy left over from the days of central planning as causes of continued inefficiency. In short, the current state of the Soviet book trade mirrors the situation in the Soviet economy as a whole, caught between the remnants of central planning and an outmoded system of privilege, on the one hand, and the greater sensitivity to the market and calls for equity which are the earmarks of *perestroika*, on the other.

Yet because the shortage of books strikes directly at the very organs of *glasnost*, it arouses particularly strong emotions, cutting to the heart of the Soviet public's response to the transformations rocking their country. The deeply rooted tradition of books as "spiritual food" has made the scarcity of desirable books a symbolic focus of the clash between deeply ingrained attitudes and "new thinking."

***Glasnost* Best Sellers**

Decades of deprivation have left the Soviet reading public with a seemingly insatiable appetite for books, and stories abound of the often frustrated rush to acquire the more sensa-

1 "A dlya menya, mozhet khleb..." (obzor pisem), *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 20 (May 19, 1989): 6.



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tional "blockbusters" of the Gorbachev era. The unreliability of newly developed polling apparatuses and the largely anecdotal nature of information on the peripheral "free market" make it difficult to gauge exactly who wants how many of which books. However, an informal survey of some indisputable *glasnost* "best sellers" gives some indication of the scope of demand and of the complex strategies which have been adopted in the thus far vain attempts to satisfy it.

Anatoly Rybakov's popular historical novel, *Children of the Arbat*, which chronicles the early years of the Stalin terror, unquestionably ranks among the most talked about and read books of the period. The novel was first published in installments in the April, May, and June 1987 issues of the journal *Druzhba narodov*. The journal's print run of 160,000 copies sold out virtually immediately, and issues containing Rybakov's novel were reportedly soon fetching many times the cover price on the black market. One reader complained in a letter to Rybakov that he was number 1,682 in the line to borrow the book from the local library.² The publication of *Children of the Arbat* coupled with the announcement of the coming publication of the sequel, *1935 and Other Years*, was probably a major factor in sending the print run of *Druzhba narodov* to 800,000 in 1988. In an unprecedented move, because no single publisher could acquire an adequate paper allotment, publication of the novel in book form has been parcelled out to eighteen different publishers. Ten million copies are now in print — yet the novel remains unavailable in the bookstores of the capital.

The appearance of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* in the Soviet Union after thirty years of suppression provides another case in point. With the publication of the first of four installments of the novel in the January 1988 issue of *Novy mir*, the journal's print run more than doubled, leaping between December and January from 496,100 copies to 1,150,000. The first book edition of *Doctor Zhivago*, which was set from the *Novy mir* edition and rushed into print in the summer of 1988, was produced by the "Vaga" Publishing House in Lithuania. The edition sold out without getting outside of the Baltic republics. The second book publication of the novel, put out by "Knizhnaya palata" in Moscow in the summer of 1989, made only a fleeting appearance in hard currency stores and never went on sale for rubles.

In the latter part of 1989, Soviet periodicals and publishing houses were gearing up for the most ambitious publishing project of *glasnost*, the recovery of the works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The way for this was cleared with the adoption, on June 30, 1989, of a resolution by the Secretariat of the Writers Union to support publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn's almost canonical status as a spokesman for the sufferings of the Soviet people has unquestionably made *The Gulag Archipelago* and, to a somewhat lesser extent,

the writer's other works the most eagerly awaited literary publications of the Gorbachev era.³

While Solzhenitsyn reportedly would have been happy to place his complete works in *Novy mir* — whose editor Sergei Zalygin laid his career on the line to get *Gulag* into print — the sheer bulk of Solzhenitsyn's *oeuvre* placed it beyond the physical capability of a single journal. The author therefore parcelled out works to a number of the other periodicals clamoring for a piece of the Solzhenitsyn pie. Not counting the publication of the essay "To Live Not By Lies" in an obscure magazine and the "pirated" edition of "Matryona's House" published last summer in *Ogonyok*, the first of Solzhenitsyn's works to appear officially in the USSR was his Nobel speech, published in the July 1989 issue of *Novy mir*. Excerpts from *Gulag* (from a selection made by Solzhenitsyn himself) came out in the August through November issues of the journal, and *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* were slated to follow. The three books of his historical opus *The Red Wheel* went to *Zvezda*, *Nash sovremennik* and *Moskva*.

Because of its enormous length, *Gulag* could be published in entirety only in book form, and the push to get out as many copies as possible as fast as possible resulted in one of the more creative publishing packages of the period. Shaped by the semi-legal status of cooperative publishers, this intricate deal provided for the publication of a million copies of *Gulag*, on paper donated by sponsors in the West, by the cooperative publisher "Vybor," which early in 1988 was involved in an illegal publication of 350,000 copies of *Gulag* in the Baltic republics. To get around the ban on cooperative publishing, "Vybor" signed contracts with the state publishing houses "Sovetskiy pisatel" and "Kniga," trading the right to use their imprints (on 500,000 copies for each publisher) for fifteen percent of the profits.⁴

Prospects, however, again appear grim that demand for Solzhenitsyn's works will be satisfied in the near future. One letter from a frustrated reader published in December 1989 in the weekly newspaper *Knizhnoe obozrenie* reported the failure of his attempts to get hold of the issues of *Novy mir* containing Solzhenitsyn's works:

After a lengthy search I found a "Soyuzpechat" kiosk which carried the journal. For two weeks I went regularly to that kiosk trying to find out about No. 7 of *Novy mir*, but a great disappointment awaited me. When I went there in August the next time, the person working in the kiosk told me that instead of the journal the instructor of the agency had sent money, and the journal itself had been "distributed" in the regional committee of the Party, since (here I am citing the kiosk worker) "some very interesting work was printed in it." If such things happen with the journal [edition], then there's no point in even dreaming of the seven-volume [edition] of Solzhenitsyn.⁵

2 Kevin Klose, "Rybakov, the Lion Come Lately," *The Washington Post* (June 8, 1988): D10.

3 See S. Shvedov, "Chto dalshe? Vozvrashchennaya literatura i obretayushchiy sebya chitatel," *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, No. 6 (1989): 62-63.

4 For details see Aleksandr Grant, "Uikend v 'Otrade' (Soveshchanie druzey i chlenov NTS), *Novoe russkoe slovo* (October 14-15, 1989): 6-7.

5 Letter from Sergei Semerikov, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 49 (December 8, 1989): 4.

Clearly the list of *glasnost* "best sellers" — ranging as it does from such "difficult" works as *Doctor Zhivago* to the sensational historical novels of Valentin Pikul — cuts across considerations of literary quality and individual taste. This suggests, as might be expected, that the current run on books stems largely from curiosity about previously banned works and a hunger for historical revelation, on the one hand, and from the inevitable "prestige" attached to ownership of scarce goods on the other. In this sense, the publication of Solzhenitsyn represents a watershed of sorts. (In an interview with the author of this article three days after the Writers' Union resolved to give the go-ahead to the publication of *Gulag*, Sergei Zalygin termed it "the end of the world.") While the works of other notable authors still await publication, certainly none can match either Solzhenitsyn's notoriety or the political provocativeness of his works. Yet even with the most eagerly awaited *glasnost* publications in literature now or soon to be in print, the crisis in Soviet publishing is far from over. The difficulties attendant in satisfying the currently inflated demand for popular publications merely magnify defects endemic to the country's book trade as a whole.

The "Bread" of *Glasnost*

The Soviet Union's chronic paper shortage remains the single most commonly cited cause of the publications deficit. The country's inability to produce sufficient paper supplies to cover its needs — despite its abundant forests — remains an embarrassing failure of the Soviet production process. Moreover, the fact that the government has for decades manipulated the shortage for purely political purposes, to deny or sharply curtail publication of out-of-favor works, cannot help but exacerbate the Soviet public's reaction to claims that books are not generally available because there is not enough paper on which to print them. Fueled by the continued use of valuable paper supplies to print unwanted publications, the strong emotions raised by the paper deficit find vent in a charged rhetoric of *glasnost*: "The bread of civilization is paper"; "For many years we had to buy bread abroad, but the 'bread' of *perestroika* — paper — is no less important"; "Of course paper is our spiritual bread."⁶ A virtual war for the limited paper allotments is being waged in all sectors of the publishing industry, mobilizing the forces for and against *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

By any standard, the figures on Soviet paper production remain bleak. According to statistics compiled by UNESCO, the Soviet Union in 1984 produced 5,380 metric tons of newsprint, other printing, and writing paper per 1,000 inhabitants as opposed to 38,974 in the United Kingdom and 75,951 in the United States.⁷ Lamenting that paper production has

been increasing by only 1% to 2% a year while on the average the print runs of periodicals rose by 5.1% in 1987 and 4.2% in 1988, the Deputy Minister of Communications somewhat optimistically concluded that "we will have to endure difficulties with paper for two to three years."⁸

The "paper recycling question" (*makulyaturny vopros*) has become one of the focuses in the public discussion of ways to alleviate the paper crisis, perhaps because it is the only stage of the process of book production in which readers are directly involved. In 1974, Goskomizdat (now Goskompechat) initiated a policy whereby people could hand in used paper products in return for coupons that entitled them, at least in theory, to buy difficult-to-acquire books. The system has reportedly never fulfilled its promise, and now, with the heightened demand for scarce publications, people complain frequently about malfunctions in the recycling system. Collection depots are inaccessible to people who live outside of urban centers, the depots run out of coupons, and the coupons are virtually worthless in acquiring scarce books. One woman from the Krasnoyarsk region sounded a particularly pathetic plea: "Maybe we could turn in 100 kg of used paper [instead of the normal 20 kg] for one book? ... After all we who live on the periphery don't see any books at all... You'll say I shouldn't get so upset because it isn't bread. But maybe for me it is bread...."⁹

In fact, at least according to one testimony, little of the paper collected from collection depots is in fact processed into paper to supply the publishing industry. While Western countries and Japan possess sophisticated technology capable of transforming recycled waste into high quality paper, the Soviet Union has virtually no equipment with which to perform this operation. Thus, most of the paper deposited for recycling is in actuality reprocessed into low quality cardboard, and the funds saved in the production of cardboard are reallocated to printing paper.¹⁰ The clumsiness of this system speaks volumes about the primitive and makeshift conditions in the Soviet printing industry.

While the need to increase paper production to a certain extent remains a palliative for the future, the question of paper allotments is an immediate issue, the focal point of the battle over the scarce paper supply. The irate response on the part of Soviet readers to governmental restrictions on subscriptions demonstrates the sensitiveness of the problem.

Limitations on the number of subscriptions available for sought-after periodicals like the liberal *Novy mir* has made access to such publications a perennial problem for Soviet readers. Under *glasnost* the situation has been exacerbated by the sharp growth in demand for such previously accessible publications as the mass circulation weekly *Ogonyok*. In an attempt to meet the increased demand, the authorities had by 1988 adopted a policy of open subscriptions to almost all

6 "Slovo chitateliya," *Ogonyok*, No. 35 (August 1989): 4; "Tak chto zhe s podpiskoy," *Ogonyok*, No. 35 (August 1989): 5.

7 UNESCO: *Statistical Yearbook* (UNESCO: Paris, 1987): 7-171, 7-177, 7-178.

8 "Tak chto zhe s podpiskoi," *Ogonyok*, No. 35 (August 1988): 5.

9 "A dlya menya, mozhet, khleb."

10 A. Lomunov, "V obmen na makulaturu," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 6 (February 10, 1989): 14.

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periodicals. However, on June 20, 1988, the Ministry of Communications issued Directive No. 315, which restricted 1989 subscriptions to their 1988 levels, designating August 1 as the closing date for subscriptions for the following year. Ministry officials blamed the move on the acuteness of the paper shortage caused by the sharp growth in demand and claimed that increasing paper production would cause pollution. In an interview with *Ogonyok*, the Deputy Minister also claimed that the limit on subscriptions was partly aimed at ensuring a sufficient supply of popular publications to libraries and to the retail market.

The public outcry against the measure, from readers and editors alike, reveals the depths of suspicion, frustration, and even bruised vanity which, in the present climate, characterize Soviet attitudes toward officialdom. In letters and telegrams to *Ogonyok*, readers complained of having lined up in the middle of the night to sign up for subscriptions only to be told that subscription orders were no longer being accepted. Others bewailed the inequities of the distribution system, claiming that the limited number of copies received by organizations were monopolized by "bosses" at various levels and never filtered down to rank and file workers. On the other hand, in a subtle acceptance of the rules of privilege, other readers prominently mentioned their own Soviet badges of honor, apparently to underscore the personal injustice of having been denied their favorite publication, as evidenced by the following telegrams printed in the publication:

CANNOT IMAGINE LIFE WITHOUT OGONYOK
WHAT SHOULD WE DO — PARTICIPANT IN THE
WAR INVALID CHEREMOVSKY VETERAN OF
LABOR SLAVNITSKY

HAVE BEEN SUBSCRIBING TO OGONYOK FOR 40
YEARS AUGUST SECOND SVERDLOVSK SUBSCRIPTION
CLOSED WHAT TO DO — VETERAN OF LABOR
LITERATURE TEACHER POLUKHINA

Other telegrams sounded a darker note of suspicion:

DON'T LET BUREAUCRATS SMOOTHER GLASNOST
WE REQUEST YOU COMMUNICATE RESULTS OF
STRUGGLE TO INCREASE SUBSCRIPTIONS TO
OGONYOK IN NEXT ISSUE WE SUPPORT PROPOSAL
OF URGENT PAPER RECYCLING DRIVE TO IN-
CREASE SUBSCRIPTIONS COLLECTIVE IN OUR IN-
STITUTE VINITI ALLOTTED ONLY 25
SUBSCRIPTIONS OF OGONYOK FOR 2500 PEOPLE —
VINITI WORKERS

INHABITANTS OF KRASNOYARSK REFUSED SUB-
SCRIPTIONS TO JOURNAL OGONYOK WE PROTEST
AGAINST TYRANNY OF ENEMIES OF PERESTROIKA
— BOROVENKO (KRASNOYARSK)

The furor over Directive No. 315 ultimately forced a reversal of the official position, and in October 1988, the Council of Ministers reopened subscriptions for the coming year. Thus the incident graphically demonstrates a new politics of *glasnost* in which the press, by publishing readers'

opinions, can successfully mobilize nascent public opinion against government policy aimed at curtailing its power. Perhaps more importantly the episode shows how profoundly the battle for paper focuses the complex of emotions released by *glasnost* and the promise of *perestroika*. Under the extraordinary conditions of *glasnost*, the axiom "you are what you read" takes on critical meaning, for ultimately at issue is a painful reevaluation of individual and social identity. After decades of being treated as second-rate citizens in their own country, rank and file Soviets are learning that they have a right to their own voices and to the voices of the publications that speak for them. Against an outmoded system of privilege and coercion embodied in the state bureaucracy, they are beginning to assert their own claims to self-worth and to a share of the good things life can offer.

"Gray Literature"

In the vocabulary of *glasnost* the term "gray literature" has come to designate the masses of unwanted publications, generated largely by vestigial ideological considerations and the general inertia of the system. They lie untouched on bookstore and library shelves, an open affront to those who are denied more desirable books on the grounds of paper shortages. Public discussion of the issue ranges through questions of what constitutes "gray literature," who is responsible for it, and what should be done about it. Clearly, the problem originates at least in part in the structure of the Soviet writers community.

The Soviet Writers Union remains under the control of the more conservative forces in the literary establishment. While there is no explicit legal connection between membership in the Writers Union and access to publishing, the fact that almost all the major literary periodicals and publishing houses are "organs" of one or another division of the union testifies to a close, if unofficial working relationship. Tatyana Tolstaya, long associated with the system of privilege which reigns in the Writers Union as the granddaughter of the Soviet "classic" Aleksei Tolstoy and now a member of the union in her own right, made the following pungent remarks about the connection between membership in the Writers Union and publishing:

No one knows exactly how it works, because it's all shrouded in secrecy. They promote the pretense that there is some sort of editorial council (*redsovet*) which chooses who will be published and who won't be published, but this editorial council in essence is completely under the influence of the secretaries of the union. The fact is that they don't have to publish members of the union. Members of the union are almost nobody. But the secretaries of the union as well as their friends, wives, mothers-in-law, grandchildren, and their dogs and their cats... It works like a mafia, and they truly do enjoy privileges, while a rank and file member of the union, if he has any privileges at all, has only tiny ones.¹¹

11 Taped interview with Tatyana Tolstaya, October 21, 1989 (translated from the Russian).

This state of affairs — in which administrative rank rather than talent or salability has been the best guarantee of access to print — has given rise to the term “secretary literature” as a major subcategory of “gray literature.”

The extent of the corruption engendered by this ingrained system of privilege was revealed in a sensational exposé by Vladimir Vigilyansky published in *Ogonyok* in October 1988.¹² Naming names and giving scandalous statistics on the abuses of publishing by highly placed literary figures, Vigilyansky disclosed how writers in powerful administrative positions have long manipulated a Byzantine hierarchy of privilege to garner huge profits for themselves through repeated publication of their works in enormous print runs, next to which the few millions of previously banned books produced under *glasnost* pale by comparison.

Faced by the threat of *perestroika*, the literary bureaucrats who continue to control the Writers Union — aided by the inertia of the central planning apparatus which allots paper years in advance — cling to their titles, prizes, prerogatives, and, above all, huge honoraria against growing pressures to relinquish their stranglehold over literature. As evidenced by a recent incident related by Galina Belya, professor of journalism at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow, despite pressure for democratization, the administration of the Writers Union is still able to wield considerable power in the publishing world:

The growth of democratic institutions in our country is proceeding extremely slowly and against great resistance from the powers that be. Thus, in 1989, the editors in the “Sovetsky pisatel” Publishing House wanted to exercise their right to self-governance and free choice of a director. Anatoly Stremyany, an active and energetic publicist, formerly an editor at “Sovetsky pisatel,” well known to his colleagues, was nominated for the vacant post. However, the leadership of the Writers Union ignored this decision, disavowed him, and appointed their candidate, B. Tukov — former secretary of the Partkom of the Union — director of the publishing house.¹³

By the same token, the editorial councils — in theory designed to promote objective editorial decisions — in practice can become dominated by cliques of writers intent on promoting their own interests. Thus, the flood of “gray literature” keeps pouring out, draining scarce printing supplies and raising the ire of readers who are sick of being “force fed” on colorless and talentless literature, while the works they truly want to read remain tantalizingly just beyond their reach.

Financial Accountability

The most efficient means of breaking the domination of the untalented over the talented in the literary world lies in demanding financial accountability in the book trade. At the

time of this writing, virtually all state publishing houses — with the exception of a few patent money losers that are still dragging their feet — have made the transition to self-financing (*khozraschet*). (Despite repeated appeals as high up as Gorbachev himself, who has reportedly agreed to the measure, journals have not yet received permission to make the change from the old system to the new.) While self-financing is unquestionably an important step in the direction of *perestroika*, the benefits derived from it remain ambiguous, and the new order contains a number of loopholes which allow and even encourage it to coexist with the old.

When the prestigious publishing house “Khudozhestvennaya literatura” — which publishes primarily reprints (eighty percent of its production) and may therefore be assumed to carry a reliable stock of saleable books — went over to self-financing, it discovered that it had always made enormous profits, which now allowed them to pay higher salaries and bonuses to their employees. Yet this financial windfall has to a large extent been offset by the requirement that a significant percentage of the surplus be handed over to the central bureaucracy, leaving “Khudozhestvennaya literatura” with only 3.78 percent of its earnings at its disposal. Moreover, ruble profits have limited value, beyond salary increases, because they are virtually worthless as a means to acquiring desperately needed Western printing technology.

An equally serious impediment to profound transformation of Soviet publishing is that while publishers have been allowed to adopt self-financing, they have not been given autonomy. They remain dependent on Goskompechat for paper allotments, access to printing equipment and distribution. As Georgy Andzheparidze, head of “Khudozhestvennaya Literatura,” lamented in an interview published in *Knizhnoe obozrenie* early in 1989, even now that political censorship has all but disappeared, book selection still remains largely beyond the control of the editor and therefore, for all intents and purposes, beyond the realm of self-financing. Calling editorial councils “the appendix of democracy,” Andzheparidze pointed out that, “In the final analysis the editorial council does not answer for the financial side of the business. It can recommend that a book be published, but cannot not guarantee that it will sell — and the members of the editorial council do not answer for it, since they do not pay the collective’s salaries out of their own pockets.”¹⁴

Moreover, publishers are responsible only for overall profits and losses, not for the financial success or failure of any individual publication. Unprofitable releases can be offset in part by library sales and in part by profits from “best sellers.” One critic of the system bitterly likened this latter dodge to using profits from the sale of flour to buy sawdust.¹⁵

Thus, the current system still allows for an endless disavowal and shifting of responsibility for inadequacies and

12 Vladimir Vigilyansky, “Grazhdanskaya voina v literature, ili o tom, kak pomoch chitatelu Lva Nikolaevicha,” *Ogonyok*, No. 43 (1988): 6-8.

13 Interview with Galina Belya, January 6, 1990.

14 Aleksandr Shchuplov, “Perestroika idiot, no... (razgorov s izdatelem),” *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 3 (January 20, 1989): 15.

15 Feliks Krivin, “Nekto v serom,” *Literaturnaya gazeta* (May 4, 1988): 3.

discrepancies in book production. Some pundits suggest that the authors themselves should be made directly responsible for the financial failure of their books, forced to pay losses out of their own pockets. In a somewhat milder form this reasoning has led to an attack on the traditional practice, dating back to before the Revolution, of paying authors by the printer's sheet (*list*), rather than on the basis of the financial viability of a manuscript. Often blamed — and not always in jest — for the exceptional length of Russian novels, this mode of payment certainly encourages “padding,” a further strain on the paper supply, as well as further divorcing the writer from real market considerations.

One curious, albeit indirect offshoot of the burgeoning sympathy for authorial accountability paradoxically threatens to create a new source of “gray literature.” In an attempt to provide an entree into publishing for new writers — who now have to compete for paper not only with entrenched establishment writers, but with resurrected and repatriated literary giants as well — Goskomizdat passed a resolution in early 1988 allowing writers to publish their works with state publishing facilities by defraying the costs out of their own pockets. (Less than a year later, the resolution was modified to allow organizations to sponsor such “vanity” publishing.) In 1988, fifty such publications appeared (eighty percent of them being *belles-lettres*), and there were plans in the works to allot special sections to such books in Moscow stores.¹⁶ While the measure is certainly true to the spirit of *glasnost* in that it gives new voices access to an audience, Andzheparidze has claimed that “democratization for the author is antidemocratization for publishers and readers,” since these publications — which, at least according to the publisher, are generally of low quality — place an added strain on the allotment of the paper supply. Thus, the system continues to encourage “graphomania” at both ends of the spectrum of writers, which means that “gray literature,” of one sort or another, is likely to remain with Soviet publishing for some time to come.

Writers as Engineers of Human Souls

The original genesis of “gray literature” must be traced back at least as far as the introduction of the socialist realist “aesthetic” during Stalin’s first five year plan (and certainly has roots much farther back in pre-revolutionary literary traditions). The belief, in which socialist realism is grounded, that the writer’s primary function is to educate, to function as an “engineer of human souls,” remains deeply entrenched both in the Soviet psyche and in the principles guiding the central bureaucracies controlling paper allotments and book distribution.

The most invidious aspect of this conception of literature lies in the assumption that the government knows better what

its citizenry should read than readers do themselves. Following upon this reasoning, even given the freer conditions in which publishing operates under *glasnost*, publishers remain under obligation to produce a certain proportion of “educational” books, and Goskompechat, by retaining control of thematic publishing quotas and paper allotments, ensures that this obligation is met.

The sphere of book distribution provides a peculiar example of how the system of centralized planning malfunctions in relation to the laws of supply and demand. The central distribution agency “Soyuzkniga” justifies its continued existence, at least in part, on the grounds that it serves to ensure an equitable apportionment of books to distant geographical areas. If they did not manipulate dealer discounts to correct for the costs of transporting books to distant places, so the argument runs, popular books would never reach outlying areas. Paradoxically, at least in some cases, books much sought after by Muscovites and Leningraders find no audience in distant areas. Yet Yury Sapozhnikov, the head of “Soyuzkniga,” recently defended this position. He maintained that his organization has a missionary status of sorts, an obligation to help the Soviet public develop its taste in literature: “One of the traditional tasks of ‘Soyuzkniga’ is to promote the development of readers’ tastes in every way possible, to take books where they are the main source of self-education.”¹⁷

The sociologists Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, who in 1988 published two substantive articles on the publications deficit,¹⁸ have argued cogently that the current unsatisfactory situation in Soviet publishing has its origin in the “forced collectivization of books,” which in the 1930s placed the entire Soviet publishing industry under central control and, reducing the number of titles published, redirected a significant percentage of the country’s scarce printing resources to mass educational literature. Because “the effectiveness of the work of such a book publishing system came to be evaluated by purely administrative criteria,” the bureaucracies overseeing the printing and distribution of books lost all responsiveness and flexibility toward the Soviet reading public. Gudkov and Dubin write, “The number of ‘active’ readers, if they had at their disposal the necessary books, would consist of 40-60 million people. Not one of the existing one-time print runs is gauged on such demand. Nor would it have to be if Goskomizdat from the very beginning had oriented itself toward diverse groups of readers, including the broadest strata as well, and had not tried, as it does now, to mold and standardize a single set of mass readership requirements for all.”¹⁹

Yet despite the obvious inadequacies of this paternalistic system of centralized control, at least some Soviet readers are leery of the possible consequences of making the transition to a completely free market. With the price of books having

16 “Polozhenie: o vypuske proizvedeniya za schet avtora,” *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 8 (February 24, 1989): 2.

17 Lyudmila Pankrateva, “Soyuz: kniga i ‘Soyuzkniga,’” *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No 28 (June 24, 1989): 2.

18 “Literaturnaya kultura: protsess i ratsion,” *Druzhba narodov*, No. 2 (1988): 168-189; “Raznost i potentsialov,” *Druzhba narodov*, No. 10 (1988): 204-217.

19 “Literaturnaya kultura”: 176-177.

already doubled in the past decade, the specter of an even greater escalation in prices looms in the future.

In this context the cooperative publishing movement has understandably emerged as a particular focus of the clash between "educative" and commercial principles in the literary process. Where state publishers remain mired in a monolithic bureaucracy that remains tied to outmoded ideological considerations, the emergence of cooperatives holds the promise of some release, for readers and rank and file writers, from state control over printing. Yet cooperative publishers, as yet denied a solid legal basis for operation, face the same impediments hindering other cooperative enterprises. They operate on the periphery of the law and scramble for scarce resources in a society that remains suspicious of private profit-making. Most importantly, as a challenge to the state monopoly over the word — hitherto the government's most jealously guarded prerogative — publishing cooperatives represent a particularly dangerous threat to the basic tenets on which the Soviet state has stood almost since its inception. The powers that be have a heavy stake in containing their operation.²⁰

One conservative critic, Aleksandr Seregin, writing against cooperatives in the retrograde journal *Molodaya gvardiya*, was careful to draw a distinction between publishing cooperatives and other cooperative enterprises. He cited Lenin to the effect that "the literary part of the party business of the proletariat cannot be tritely identified with other parts of the party business of the proletariat," maintaining that, "If book publishing is not merely a branch of production, then a book should not blindly be equated with a boot or a cap."²¹ Striking out at those who have claimed a precedent for cooperative publishers in the private publishers of the NEP period, the author asserts: "The revolution gave birth to cooperative publishers, but not the October revolution, the February one." And again, in the old-style rhetoric of Soviet conservatives, he turns to Lenin for validation: "Vladimir Ilich from time to time encountered on the book market published literature of a pornographic, religious, and overtly counter-revolutionary character. Therefore on his initiative on December 12, 1921, the decree 'On Private Publishers' was signed, establishing control over their work." The message here is clear. If cooperative publishers are allowed to function outside the aegis of the state, the entire moral fabric of Soviet society will be placed in jeopardy.

The "Free" Market

Conservative arguments against cooperative publishers also serve to highlight an enduring antipathy in Soviet society against capitalist profit-taking. In this connection, in the same *Molodaya gvardiya* article, Seregin argues that, while the main purpose of allowing cooperative enterprises to function openly

was to tap resources previously held back from the state, cooperative publishing merely drains the limited supplies of paper and printing equipment. Moreover, rather than performing a potentially valuable service by publishing new authors, the cooperatives, driven above all by commercial considerations, will merely print the same high demand material as state publishing houses, in essence robbing the state:

I had the opportunity to hold one such article, published by cooperators, in my hands. About the size of a matchbox, but twice as thin, this miniature book of Pasternak's verses costs five rubles. Having printed ten thousand copies of about 30 of the poet's poems, the successful cooperators put into their own pockets a very large sum, which, I am convinced, by right belongs to the state. I cannot understand at all why proceeds from the republication of Bulgakov or Maupassant or some other of the greats should profit cooperatives. What is their primary role, what do they create, and how can we measure the correspondence between private profits and the quantity and quality of labor? In the given case there is an economically unfounded inflation of prices, which in unscientific language is called ordinary self-interest.

Seregin's rhetoric plays to deep-seated prejudices and fears in his conservative readership, long inured by Marxist-Leninist rhetoric coupled with enforced sacrifices of basic goods to abhorrence of those who seemingly profit from their society's misery.

The indignation induced by the idea of "unearned money" finds its most direct target in the black market in books, a longstanding Soviet "institution" that has apparently grown and diversified in today's more open climate. The black market in books represents an amorphous agglomeration of people and activities all of which have in common that they earn reportedly huge profits by trading on the publications deficit. From the buying and selling of a broad spectrum of dealers ranging from hardened professional speculators to amateur bibliophiles, the black market shades over into a *glasnost*-bred commercial "samizdat" generated by illicit use of state-owned printing and copying equipment. By all accounts, the wares offered for sale are eclectic, including anything from the latest prose sensations to poetry by Akhmatova and Mandelshtam to pulp science fiction that is eagerly snapped up by the emerging popular readership. Particularly galling to readers and officials alike is that much of the stock traded on the black market is pilfered at different stages of the production and distribution process from state supplies. Moreover, speculators constantly case bookstores in order to snap up hot new releases and turn a tidy and probably almost immediate profit of up to ten times the cover price at the expense of regular buyers.²²

Attempts to crack down on the black market have generally proved ineffectual. Critics charge that fines levied against speculators are simply too low to act as a serious deterrent. In

20 See for instance, Yu. Aleksandrov, "Kooperativ i kniga," *Literaturnaya gazeta* (August 9, 1989): 7.

21 Aleksandr Seregin, "Na telege po shosse? (nekotorye mysli ob izdatelskikh kooperativakh)," *Molodaya gvardiya*, No. 6 (1988): 284, 285.

22 See "Golos knizhnykh zhuchkov," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 21 (May 26, 1989): 6.

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any case the police simply cannot cope with the situation, leaving speculators to operate relatively openly at such notorious marts as Moscow's Kuznetsky Most.²³ In an attempt at least to take back a share of the profits disappearing into private pockets, a measure was recently passed to allow state antiquarian and used book stores to sell books on commission at prices competitive with those asked on the black market.²⁴ However, this stopgap measure — a case of far too little, far too late — shows no sign of making a significant dent in black market trade, which is certain to flourish as long as the state publishing apparatus is unable to meet demand.

Perspectives

Perhaps all that can be said with certainty about Soviet literary publishing today is that it does not work. Measures already introduced to alleviate the situation are patently inadequate to cope with the magnitude of the crisis. Against the establishment of a completely free market in books still stand the powerful state bureaucracy and the literary old guard, desperately clinging to their power base against an ever more vocal tide of resentment. Inseparable from the ills plaguing the rest of the Soviet economy, the printing establishment must wait for conversion from obsolescent machinery and labor intensive production techniques to more sophisticated Western technology as well as an adequate solution to chronic paper and equipment deficiencies, a solution which remains out of reach because of the hard currency deficit. And finally, publishers need accurate mechanisms for gauging demand in order to satisfy the geographically and demographically enormous

and diverse appetite for books. Without significant changes in these areas, it is doubtful that Soviet publishing facilities could cope even with a hypothetical "post-glasnost" normalization of demand.

Behind all of these deficiencies stands the more serious problem of deeply entrenched attitudes, acquired over decades, which are resistant to the principles of tolerance, respect for diversity, and acceptance of the free market. Opposition to any commercialization of publishing, from both liberals and conservatives, threatens to hinder the progress of change. This obstacle is reinforced by the profound resentment of entrepreneurship in Soviet society.

Ultimately the outcome will depend on whether the forces threatening to rip up Soviet society can be held back until the seeds planted by Gorbachev have taken root. In time, as the older generation is replaced, longstanding prejudices and resentments may begin to disappear. Sadly, an almost inevitable side effect of the opening of Soviet society could be an eventual transfer of allegiance from literature to the mass media. Russian and Soviet literature have always been the precocious children of censorship. Now that what could formerly only be slipped by censors in the aesopian guise of fiction can be shouted openly in the mass media, literature may be displaced to the periphery — as it has long been in the West — by the seductive rhythms of television, movies and rock music.

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23 A. Khoroshev, "Torgovlya s ruk...: Spekulant i Tolkuchka," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 1 (January 6, 1989): 10.

24 A. Govorov, T. Sokratova, N. Chulanova, "Otkuda berutsya i kuda vozvrashchayutsya dengi (O bukinisticheskoy torgovle, 'chyornom rynke' i dogovornykh tsenakh)," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, No. 20 (May 19, 1989): 4.